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The postwar years were the era of the integration of America's professional sports. Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, Bill Willis and others became household names. Black movie stars made had significant cultural milestones during the decade, while television appearances remained typed and relatively rare. Music, particularly rock and roll, had a unifying influence on the youth culture of America. The postwar era coincided with congressional anti-Communism investigations, and black writers and performers were investigated for having expressed sympathy for an ideological that did not tolerate racism.

Football was integrated in 1946. That year, 4 black athletes took to the professional gridiron. Bill Willis, playing for the Cleveland Browns, is considered to be the first black starter in football. Marion Motley played for the Browns that year, while Kenny Washington and Woody Strode played for the Los Angeles Rams. Strode would go on to a career in film.

In 1946 Jackie Robinson signed with the Brooklyn Dodgers and played with their farm team in Montreal. The following year, six days before the start of the 1947 season, the Dodgers called Robinson up to the major leagues, where he played initially as a first baseman. Robinson made his debut at Ebbets Field in front of 26,623 spectators, including 14,000 African Americans. Robinson's presence caused some racial tension amongst his teammates, until Dodgers management sent a clear message. Manager Leo Durocher told the team, "I do not care if the guy is yellow or black, or if he has stripes like a fuckin' zebra. I'm the manager of this team, and I say he plays. What's more, I say he can make us all rich. And if any of you cannot use the money, I will see that you are all traded."

The Baseball Commissioner and the National League President squelched a potential strike by racist players by threatening to suspend them. Nevertheless, Robinson endured racial abuse from both fans and players. On April 22, 1947, during a game between the Dodgers and the Philadelphia Phillies, Phillies players called Robinson a "nigger" from their dugout and yelled that he should "go back to the cotton fields". On May 14, on the Dodgers' first visit of the season to Cincinnati, Robinson was subjected to a torrent of racial abuse from fans.

They also hurled insults at teammate Pee Wee Reece, because Reece was a Southerner, born just across the river from Cincinnati in Kentucky, and here he was "playing ball with a nigger," Robinson later recalled. During the episode, Pee Wee left his position and walked over to Robinson at second base. He put his arm around his shoulder and stood talking until the jeering stopped. Robinson recounted these episodes in a later interview. Robinson endured the taunts and death threats stoically, however, and his flawless fielding at first base, timely hitting, and 29 stolen bases helped the Dodgers capture the National League pennant and won him the title Rookie of the Year. Two years later, in 1949, he won the batting championship with a .342 average and was voted the league's Most Valuable Player.

In 1948, Ted Rhodes became the first African American to compete in the U.S. Open golf championships since John Shippen prior to WWI. Charlie Sifford was the first black American to receive tour playing privileges, in 1961.

Chuck Cooper was the first black player drafted in NBA history in 1950. Cooper was picked in the second round of the draft by the Boston Celtics. In the eighth round, Earl Lloyd was picked by Washington. Later, Nat "Sweetwater" Clifton was signed by the New York Knicks. Lloyd made his debut first, on October 31, 1950.

In 1950, Althea Gibson became the first black American to compete at any of tennis' "majors," at the U.S. Championships. On August 28, Gibson beat Barbara Knapp 6-2, 6-2 in the first round. She was escorted off the court by former champion Alice Marble, and a mixed crowd of smiling fans. The following year Gibson also competed at Wimbledon. She became the first African American, man or woman, to win a major at the 1956 French Open. By the end of the 1958 season she had added two Wimbledon and two U.S. Championships in singles competition, as well as 6 major doubles titles.

In 1958, Willie O'Ree became the first back to play in professional hockey, with the Boston Bruins. O'Ree was not an African American, however, as he held Canadian citizenship. O'Ree noted that "racist remarks were much worse in the U.S. cities than in Toronto and Montreal," the two Canadian cities hosting NHL teams at the time, and that "Fans would yell, 'Go back to the South' and 'How come you're not picking cotton?' Things like that. It didn't bother me. I just wanted to be a hockey player, and if they couldn't accept that fact, that was their problem, not mine." He would remain the only black to have played professional hockey for 15 years.